

# King County Democrats 2023 Endorsement Questionnaire

**Name**

Ben Gitenstein

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**Phone number**

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**Candidate name**

Ben Gitenstein

**Candidate pronouns**

He/Him

**Candidate name pronunciation**

Git-en-steen

**Campaign Filer\_Name**

We Deserve Better Schools

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**Treasurer phone**

(206) 229-4980

**What type of position are you running for?**

School

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Seattle School District No. 1

**Are you a Democrat?**

Yes

**Have you ever been a member of another political party?**

No

**Have you ever been found in violation of a Public Disclosure Commission, Federal Election Commission, or Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission regulation?**

No

**Do you have a code of conduct for campaign staff and volunteers?**

Qualified

**If you have campaign staff, do you support them joining a labor union?**

Yes

**Do you support employees of your jurisdiction (e.g. your city's employees, the Port's employees, etc.) exercising their collective bargaining rights without fear of retaliation, including the right to bargain and strike for better working conditions and pay?**

Yes

**Are you willing to have yourself, your staff, and your peers undergo training to understand and combat institutional racism, implicit bias, and sexual harassment?**

Yes

**Will your campaign accept contributions from corporate fossil fuel PACs?**

No

**Will your campaign accept contributions from corporate pharmaceutical PACs or corporate health insurance PACs?**

No

**Will your campaign accept contributions from corporate building industry PACs, including the Building Industry Association of Washington (BIAW) and the National Association of Home Builders?**

No

**Will your campaign accept contributions from law enforcement or sheriffs' organizations?**

No

**Will you return contributions from companies or PACs who are aligned with the organizations listed above and others that conflict with Democratic Party values?**

Yes

**Have you made any donations to Republican candidates or Republican Party organizations in the last 5 years?**

No

**Have you previously participated, or will you be participating, in a candidate training program like Institute for a Democratic Future or Emerge?**

No

**For any Yes/No questions you answered "qualified", please explain:**

My campaign staff is, currently, myself. When the staff gets large enough to merit a code of conduct I will institute one.

**Please describe your background (education, employment, community and civic activity, union affiliation, and political activity).**

I have been an active Democrat for all of my adult life. I started as a community organizer in New York City, helping connect low income schools to technology as part of "digital divide" initiatives. After moving to Seattle I joined the Housing Development Coalition to work on low income housing policy. I then became the Executive Director of the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance where we spearheaded the first push to bring the Housing Trust Fund to \$1B. After WLIHA I joined the John Kerry for President Campaign, and worked on the Democratic Coordinated Campaign. Since then I have been an active fundraiser (most recently for Joe Biden's 2020 campaign).

In the past 5 years, as my kids have moved through the Seattle Public Schools I have become more and more engaged (and deeply deeply frustrated) with Seattle Public Schools. I have watched School Board meetings (virtually), volunteered at school activities, and mostly talked with other parents who share my same deep sense of frustration.

**What motivated you to run for this position and how would you evaluate your success?**

I am running for Seattle School Board for 3 reasons. First, Democracy is not a spectator sport. I'm a father of two kids and I have taught them since they were little that being a citizen means paying your taxes, voting, and speaking up when you see something that you believe is wrong. I want them to see their dad doing more than complaining about the state of schools.

Second, because there is a quiet crisis in Seattle Public Schools. Enrollment is falling, the board is clearly going to close schools, the school budget is in a long-term death spiral, our most vulnerable kids are being failed, and worst of all a kid was murdered at school and we've done nothing about it. Our schools are on a not-so-long-term trajectory to failure, and we aren't talking about it.

Third, I want to see a real debate. Before I entered there were two candidates in the race for the 3rd district, Christie Robertson and Evan Briggs. Christie is an excellent candidate and would make a great Director (I don't know Evan). But without a primary there will be no discussion of issues, no debate, instead we will just skip to the general election where the school board race will get drowned out by the City Council races. I want a real debate.

**What are the top three issues of urgency that you will address if elected?**

There are 5 issues that motivate me most:

1. Gun violence. A child was murdered at one of our schools and we have done nothing in response. This is a tacit acceptance of gun violence.
2. School closures. The School Board and Superintendent are clearly on a path to close schools under the misguided belief that this will save money. It will only serve to rob communities of the schools that have been a touch point for families, and in 10 years we will wish we hadn't.
3. Long term unsustainability. The Seattle Public Schools are in a constant state of budget panic brought on by a fundamentally unsound financial foundation. Combined with falling enrollment, this is a death spiral.
4. Private school flight. While the Board and Superintendent would like us to believe that falling enrollment is a result of birth rates, it is clearly a result of the flight to private school. This will only serve to further segregate our schools while deepening their financial crisis.
5. Failure of students furthest from educational justice. Most importantly, our School Board set out to improve educational outcomes for the students who have most been harmed by institutional racism. But even according to the District's own measures those students are being failed worse today than they were in 2019.

**How will you involve all residents and engage all communities in the decision-making process?**

This is a question that should really be asked of the existing Board which has essentially done away with public comment and has embraced "intro and action" in nearly every meeting. No matter the complexity of the issue, our Board seems happy to both introduce a motion and vote on it in the same meeting. This is not only un-Democratic and anti-transparent, it leads to poor decisions.

So what would I do? Reverse that. Bring back debate to the School Board. Meet with constituents. Expand public comment periods. End the practice of "intro and action" in the same meeting.

**How have you promoted an enduring environment of inclusivity, diversity, and equity?**

I am a white, straight, cis-gendered male who has benefitted from various forms of societal privilege. I accept and own that. I have tried to use my privilege wherever possible to fight for change that benefits those who have not benefited from privilege. The homeless, those struggling to pay their rent, just as an example.

I believe that public schools should (and can) be great for every kid. They can lift every kid up, help every family, no matter their story. But that won't happen unless we make some real changes.

**If elected, how will you address inequalities experienced among BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, or other marginalized communities and advance an agenda of equality?**

First, I will demand that we face reality. We are not serving the students who most need our help, those furthest from educational justice, with our current strategy. That is evident in their test scores (which are flawed measurements, but they are the measures our Board has chosen to focus on), which on many vectors are BELOW 2019 levels.

Second, I will fight to keep schools open. These buildings are connection points for marginalized students. They are safe spaces, places to connect with friends, services, and sometimes just get breakfast. Closing those buildings is a disservice to those communities.

**Do you support charter schools and/or vouchers for private/religious school education?**

No

**Do you support supplemental funding for International Baccalaureate & Advanced Placement testing for low-income students?**

Yes

**Do you support salary increases for teachers and paraprofessionals?**

Yes

**Do you support continuing and expanding art, music, physical education, and library classes?**

Yes

**Do you support enhancing awareness of the option for parents to 'opt out' their students from military recruitment activities?**

Yes

**What policies or changes will you seek to ensure that all students receive an education that enables them to reach their fullest potential?**

First, let's take gun violence seriously, because a kid who lives in fear of violence can't learn. That means we need to actually publish findings from the tragedy at Ingraham. We need to insist that the Superintendent publish a real plan to make our schools safer, to find the kids at risk of violence and engage with them (not just punish them). Of course we need to push for sane gun laws, but most importantly we need to insist that our school leaders take serious action on safety in our schools.

Second, let's keep schools open. Kids who have a school in their community are a lot more likely to reach their potential than those who are bussed to bigger schools.

Third, let's stop private school flight. Parents who can afford it are pulling their kids out of Seattle Public at alarming rates. Let's build programs that make them excited to keep their kids in SPS, let's bring back the programs that kept them there in the first place (like the Band program at Washington Middle).

Fourth, let's stop pretending that our strategy to help the students most in need is working. It's not. The students furthest from educational justice deserve our love and attention. But they also deserve honesty. We should be honest with them, and ourselves, that the approach we are taking is not working.

**How will you address equity in discipline, particularly regarding school resource officers?**

The best way to provide equity in discipline is that have functional schools that are deeply ingrained in their communities and neighborhoods. When we close neighborhood schools in favor of larger concentrated schools we inevitably treat kids as standardized and cookie cutter. The best thing we can do to provide equity in discipline is to keep schools open.

If school resource officers are detrimental to discipline equity then we should address that head on. But let's start by making sure we have the school buildings we need, filled with a mix of students, backed by a funding plan that's sustainable for the long-term, staffed by supported and supportive educators, and without the fear of gun violence.

**What will you do to advocate for ample and equitable funding for K-12 education including special education, school nurses, counselors, mental health professionals, and paraeducators?**

First, every school board member should be a fierce advocate for public education funding. I'm comfortable in Olympia and happy to join advocacy days and lobby members.

Second, and more importantly, the best thing the School Board can do to ensure equitable funding for schools is stop the never-ending operating budget crisis. Reverse the flight to private school. Build a budget that saves what matters most. Stop paying exorbitant fees to outside consultants and Ed Tech companies. Stop building mega-schools, re-invest in the communities that our schools call home. None of these will be easy, but it's a lot easier to ask legislators and voters for more resources when we've built a sustainable financial foundation.

**Nation-wide, we have seen examples of parents objecting to books in school libraries with subjects that include racial injustice, the experience of BIPOC communities, and LGBTQIA+ perspectives. How will you address the concerns of these parents and uphold your district's policies?**

There is no place for banning books in our schools. Full stop. Say it clearly, repeat it, don't waver about it.

But this is all irrelevant if the school is closed. When we close schools, we close school libraries. Which of course is effectively a ban on all the books in that library.

**Environmental concerns impact students differently depending on the location of their homes and the maintenance of their school buildings. Provide examples of your climate justice actions to date and your specific plans for school-related environmental equity for all enrolled students.**

I've been an advocate for low income housing which brings families into healthy homes, and often out of environmental crisis. I've helped elect Democrats who care deeply about the environment. My family has adopted solar power and electric vehicles.

The best way we can provide environmental equity for all kids is to keep community schools open and protect playgrounds and open space at our schools. This of course will require that the Board rethink its strategy to consolidate neighborhood schools into mega-schools and instead build a long-term plan to make SPS sustainable both environmentally and financially.

**CERTIFICATION: I hereby certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the provided information is true and accurate.**

Yes

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